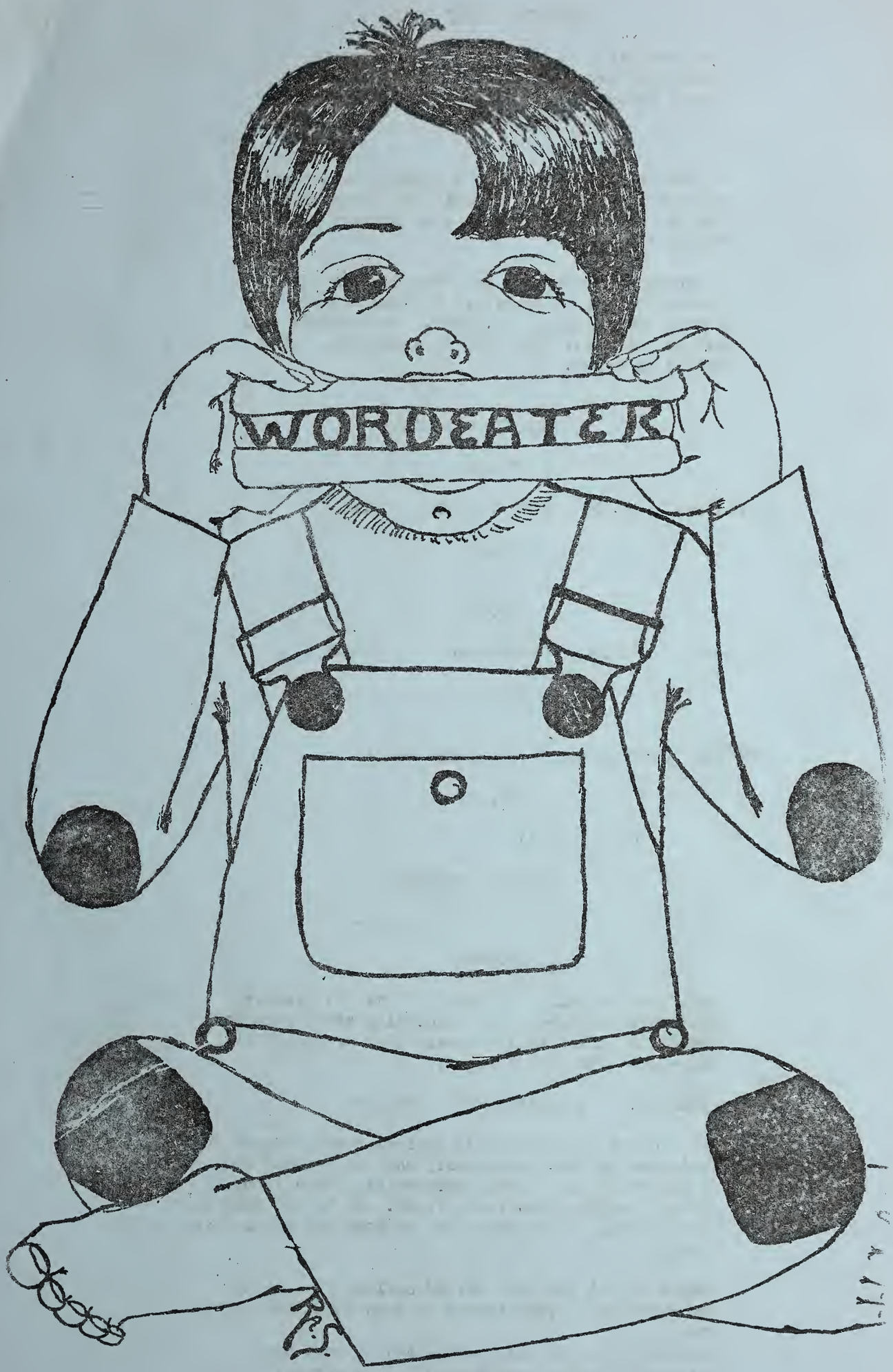
WORDEATER

WORDEATER XXVII STAFF

Erik Alander
Nancy Lockhart
Janice LeFevers
Mary Martin
Pat Mulder
Mike Vollmer
John Stobart

For this issue, to get a submission accepted, four of the above had to vote for acceptance. For the award winners only John Stobart is responsible.

Present manuscripts or cover designs for number 28 must be submitted to John Stobart in room C 1069 by April 27, 1979. Manuscripts will not be returned. They may be anonymous. They should be typed.

WORDEATER WINNERS:

$25.00

In Poetry: $25.00 JUDY BELFIELD $25.00

$25.00

$25.00

In Prose $25.00 Pat Mulder $25.00

$25.00

For Cover Designs (front and back)

$20.00

(2 X $10.00)

ROSEANNA SPANGLER

(2 X $10.00)

$20.00

LOUDMOUTH McKRACKEN SO DECRIES! via J. Stobart, his representative. The preceeding awards are for WORDEATER XXVII, this volume. Similar awards will be granted for future issues.

DEADLINE: Wordeater 28 ---April 27

The elegant oil lamp cover designs for Wordeater 26 were done by FRANK Grabowski, who was renamed Tom by the staff elf, who is responsible for all our errors. Sorry about that, Frank. We try to keep the little devil in his cage, but he does get out now and then.

Thanks to all who have helped collate (primarily the Staff) the 2,000 issues of each WORDEATER we've done.
Special thanks to Judy Belfield, who must have collated at least 1000 copies all by herself.

Roseanna Spangler dedicates her cover designs

to "mi hijos", Shawn and Trinity Cisneros.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Richard Merrill	Ah, Spring!	page 1
	Getting Stoned on a Snowy Evening	page 1
Carolyn M. Tate	Riddle	page 1
	Reformed Hippies	page 1
	Run From Me	page 1
	Key West	page 2
	It Was Only a Summer Storm	page 2
	With Simplicity	page 2
	Control	page 3
	Sirocco	page 3
Steve Siedler	Progress	page 3
	A Message to K	page 3
	Progression: Take Two	page 4
	The Glory of the Gory	page 4
Mary Martin	Food for Thought	page 5
	Surrealistic Schoolroom	page 5
	Shadows	page 5
Michael Gettys	End of the Day	page 6
John Fillipitch	My Brother is Wearing My Shoes	page 6
R. A. Spangler	Hate Who	page 6
	Ugly Girls	page 6
Jeanette Hoffman	Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow	page 7
	My Breath Escapes Me	page 7
Adriane Saylor	A Pilgrim in the World	page 8
	Giant	page 8
	Breaking Life	page 9
	Trying to Get Soft	page 9
Janice LeFevers	Food for Thought	page 9
	Tradition	page 10
	Middle Age Crisis	page 10
	I Wonder	page 10
Michael Vollmer	The Observer	page 11
	Some Girls	page 11
	Lucky Twenty One	page 11
Holly Trevisan	Sonnet	page 12
	The Solitary Diner	page 12
	Adam	page 12
Nancy Lockhart	What Do You Hear From Regina	page 13
	Randy	page 13
	Sonnet	page 13
	And I Said I'd Never Write Another Sonnet	page 14
	I Know The Words	page 14
	Minute Mystery	page 14
Judy Belfield	Do the Funeral With Your Partner	page 16
	Neptune's Triumph	page 16
	A Chasm of Dementia	page 16
	Mine Are Spared	page 16
	To A Poetic Einstein	page 17
	Disillusion	page 17
	For Another Judy	page 18
	Snowfall	page 18
	And You Ask Me If I Love You	page 19
	Abashed Misgivings	page 19
	Autocrat in Embryo	page 20
	Lingering Shadows	page 20
Pat Mulder	Consciousness Raising	page 23
	Letting Go	page 23
	Singing the Winter Road Blues	page 24
	Like a Maple Tree	page 25
	As Cold As the Crystal Snow	page 26
	Locked-Up Words	page 26
	The Waiting Room	page 28
	A Child's View of W.W. II	page 29
	Getting Unstuck, but Not Unglued	page 33

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RICHARD MERRILL

AH, SPRING!

Ah, spring!
Winter is over!
No more snow,
Sleet,
Ice,
Freezing rain,
Cold!
Spring is here!
Rain!
Flooding!
Mosquitoes!
Encephalitus!
Tornadoes!
Ah, spring!

GETTING STONED ON A SNOWY EVENING

Whose bag is this I think I know
He's crashed out in the bedroom though;
He will not see me toking here
Or see his kitchen fill with smoke.

My fuzzy mind is thinking queer
To toke without a party near
Inside a kitchen by myself
The highest I've been so far this year.

I give my dizzy head a shake
And ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the jams
Of Aerosmith and Greg Lake.

I go to the window and open the sash.
But before I put away his stash,
Another joint before I crash,
Another joint before I crash.

CAROLYN M. TATE

RIDDLE

When a Buddhist and a Baptist
get together for a beer,
are there two gods,
one,
or none?

RUN FROM ME

You run from me
and on a good day-
that's pretty funny.
Bemused,
I and my ego
conjure the reasons-
all of them touched
with your fear

But there are some days
I entangle myself
in the question
and catch myself
hoping to find you-
on a drunken night
on a free night
on just any night.

REFORMED HIPPIES

Reformed hippies wear three piece suits
and call themselves lawyers.
They paint their toenails red
and call themselves journalists,
without protest.
After all, man,
if someone asks
who the hell is Jerry Rubin,
reformed hippies inform them
he's a seminar oriented vegetarian.

Some revolution-
free love days,
Haight-Ashbury days,
Chicago Convention days,
stoned angry babies.

Oh sure,
Carter's administration
and doctors smoke pot.
Women can work on assembly lines
and get dirty and ulcers.

Reformed hippies drink martinis
dry and buy
Jaguars,
color televisions,
and Martin Luther King
is a birthday
and a highway.

And there's no need
for candles and incense.
Reformed hippies
have the flashing light at the Disco,
and they have full mooned nights
of secret destinations.

KEY WEST

In May and twilight,
a woman somewhere
in the background sings Spanish
to a guitar

sweating
in the tropical night swarming
with Cubans in white
and suntanned hippies
at the sidewalk cafe
where Hemingway drank.

We drink cool rum
and watch gulf winds fan
yellowed palm trees.
This sultry night was a mirage day.
Tomorrow,
overhead gulls will soar
and screech vainly of their necessity.

A white haired boy saunters
through heat waves to ask me
Wanna cop some acid, man?
But, I am a woman.

The calmwind beauty
of the sea anatomy is threatened
by thunderous hands
that hurl to shore
bits of coral,
mother of pearl,
ancient jewelry of Sirens.

Between your rum
you say Hemingway was crazy
to do what he did with the gun.

But to see beauty
is to sense death,
and I suspect
birds in the jungle
will always seek the tallest tree
with their own sense of dignity
when it is time.

The woman's voice rises
over the tables,
the white haired boy backs away,
you are quiet in your thoughts,
and I am drinking cool rum.

IT WAS ONLY A SUMMER STORM

You haven't talked to me
since the night
of the almost tornado
last summer.

I guess you think I'm
pretty god damned crazy
to have been so unafraid,
captured by the electricity,
the rage
of the sky
and the air swirling
my hair like a madwoman
broken loose from chains
and screaming above the howl,
challenging the sky
to take me.

Look, I'm still here.
It was only a silly dare
in revenge for all those libraries.

You know, I laugh
every time I think
of the look
on your face
at my clothes plastered
by the storm.
It might as well have been
blood running
down my face.
...it was only rain.
It was only a summer storm
that got a little out of hand.

WITH SIMPLICITY

Surprise me with simplicity
and a cup of tea.
Rub my back
and whisper the secret beauty
of wolves in the forest,
domestic love,
and chile.

Play Zen basketball,
Laugh with me.
Write to me
of winter windows
and cloths of flame
dancing.

In moments
of distance,
call me,
tell me

you must hear my voice
to know with certainty
I still exist
in your world.

And if you must cry,
cry for the joy
of a child born
with old man's eyes.

CAROLYN M. TATE, con't.

CONTROL

Because lovely words
can be empty,
and float through mornings after
the wine is gone-
lead filled realities,
grim possibilities
to confuse the issue.
I'ts a long journey back
to walled in gardens
we spend lifetimes growing-
exotic flowers of control
within
to keep us sane
and separate from all
that would drift us.

So rip that letter
to pieces
that should have been mine.

SIROCCO

You reveal yourself
in Sisyphean dreams,
robes falling open
to expose you.

You remember the day
the sun disappeared
to brood and defy
your emptiness.

And you remember
the singing swan,
empyrean blue,
that blinded you.

******

STEVE SIEDLER

PROGRESS!?

Nightmares of mediocrity.
A million complacent dupes,
Domineering, failure-fearing, overbearing,
undercaring, procrastinators,
with lines upon lines of putrid underwear,
And cluttered revelations
Stating doubtful expectations
Of reuniting separate parts
of retrogressing pygmy hearts.
Indeed!
Inebriated satisfaction
Gained from glories long since gone.
Retarded puppets devoid of action
With silken sails to trod upon,
And regurgitate into
when finally nauseated by:
Fossil fortunes and timeworn treasures,
weakened solutions of rotting pleasures,
Baseless bastards!
Idly desiring puzzle lives
with childish children and overweight wives
while bidding farewell their sexual drives.
A simple case of matter over mind-
Consenting adults left far behind.

A MESSAGE TO K.

One socially affluent
Philosophically incongruent
Martyr-female
Practices verbal castration daily
On long grey lines of manic
depressives.
Bitch!
Further observations
Pronounce romantic inclinations
Forever deceased.
Simple!
Take your attractive potions
of feigned emotions elsewhere.
Review your dreams and social
schemes for a new fool.
Produce your parades and
painful charades under new
management.
This market is closed!

PROGRESSION: TAKE TWO

Intentional assaults on innocence
Produce direct reactions from within,
As acquisitioned age makes present
tense
Nostalgic of a youthful regimen.

Intense confusion can deflect the glow
Of effervescent wisdom's peaceful rays,
And mass-produced intelligence can't flow
To help dissolve those indecisive ways.

But wealth in changed decisions will
replace
Naive commitments of a lesser mind,
And progress can proceed at rapid pace
Once course and crude deductions
are refined.

Much sooner would creative rivers
wind
If future could be viewed from
just behind.

THE GLORY OF THE GORY

I'll tell you a story you've probably
heard,
'bout a french-fried psycho who's
eardrums purred.
He programmed computers for the
time of day
And wore big ole shorts in the
weirdest way.

Yep, poor ole George, convicted then
tried,
Made people eat Jello 'till they
jiggled and died.

His targets were children, he liked
them most,
He invited 'em over for a
gelatine toast.
They bloated the quickest on the
least amount,
And wiggled to death to a
rhythmic count.

Yep, poor ole George, convicted
then tried,
Fed babies bottled Jello while
their diapers dried.

They caught ole George with
technology:
An undercover midget with a strategy.
His plan was perfect, and George
got burned,
He shoved 'im in his Jello while
his back was turned.

Yep, poor ole George, convicted then
tried,
Created new flavors with his
humble hide.

They discussed him at parties,
They discussed him at tea,
They made ole George a
celebrity,
His name's in a book full
of heinous crimes,
And is being preserved
through heinous rhymes.

Yep, poor ole George, convicted
then tried,
And every box of Jello has
George inside.

MARY MARTIN

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Poetry can't dig a ditch,
Or feed a hungry man.
Poetry can't scratch an itch,
Or buy things money can.

Poetry can't quench a thirst,
Or warm a chilly night.
So now let's just put first things first
And set our values right.

But poetry does warm with fires
That glow like cherry coal,
And feeds my mind its heart's desires,
And scratches the itch in my soul.

SURREALISTIC SCHOOLROOM

In my schoolroom
the walls are made of certain uncertainties
and mystified minds.
The chalkboard waves its emptiness
like a mourning ribbon.
The floors are prisoner-shuffled smooth.
The neon glare illuminates white-clown faces
but never grey-fogged minds.
We are scattered about the room
like colored confetti circles
flat, purposeless.
That's how it is when nobody knows the answer.

SHADOWS

I want to live always in the sun
on the hill.
Laugh and play in brightness
till I've had my fill.
My hours should be as many
as silver grains of sand.
I shun the foggy shadows
of the misty lower land.

I want to live forever
in the warmth and light.
And hide myself away from
the damp, chill night
"But I can't hold you forever"
said the sun on the hill.
The answer from the shadows came--
"Wait, we will."

R. A. SPANGLER

HATE WHO?

I am neither white nor brown;
I am neither black or yellow;
I am neither red or pink;
I am of no color or substance;
I am the essence of your conscience.
I don't know why you hate them;
I don't know why you hate me.
They are a part of you
as they are a part of me.
God makes them, an' you, an' me exist.
No matter how meager and bleek,
or cheerful and bountiful.
To say you hate 'them' is to say you hate me.
To say you hate 'them' is to say you hate yourself.

UGLY GIRLS

Ugly girls don't deserve no love.
Ugly girls don't rate no affection.
Ugly girls are just supposed
to be by themselves.
Cryin' in their loneliness, ugly girls.
Ugly girls are supposed
to accept second rate.
Ugly girls, that's alright, just push them aside.
Ugly girls are supposed to
take what they can get,
an' they can't get much.

****

MICHAEL GETTYS

END THE DAY

Please don't keep me on
Tonight,
I'm tired
let my eyes shut
take me deep.
Give me silence free of
Dream,
Warmth Unwire
It all goodnight,
my soul to sleep.

*****

JOHN FILLIPITCH

MY BROTHER IS WEARING MY SHOES

My brother is wearing my shoes.
I ought to complain,
But the shoes don't fit me
Anymore.
Isn't it sad that I still want to wear them?
I thought I was older
When I was that age.
How comfortable he seems
In my old pair of shoes.
There seems a bliss in naivete
And innocence.
Perhaps the shoes I am wearing
Now
Will one day seem as comfortable.

JEANETTE HOFFMAN

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

Yesterday,
from morn till dusk
I toiled
Nails scraping
and back straining
for you,
and your dream.
In my soul,
you were,
my dream,
my vision,
my tomorrow.
And so I
struggled
against immense obstacles
Today,
I lift you up
and exalt.
For you and success
are one.
You are incomparable,
towering above the
highest heights.
Satisfaction rests
within my bosom.
For even as you
stand upon your pedestal,
I know it was
on my back
you were carried.
I feel the pain,
of clambering over
desperation and despair.
My garments
hang in shreds.
As the battle
over poverty and principle
takes its toll.
But there you stand,
in all your brazen
glory.
A heart full of
contentment
and a physique
clothed in richness
I gaze at you.
The moment
may stretch into an hour.
But you shall surely
tire of your pedestal,
And tomorrow,
I'll
be helping you down.

MY BREATH ESCAPES ME

My breath escapes me,
the broad shoulders are dwarfing,
Gazing
into the face,
I'm mesmerized.
Skin, like well worn khakis.
A cloud of curling silk
envelopes the arrogant head.
The mouth,
the last word in perfection.
Those smouldering eyes hold me,
a single white rose
in a crystal bud vase.
Abruptly,
he turns
and drops his glance.
I shatter
and the rose withers.

ADRIANE SAYLOR

A PILGRIM IN THE WORLD

Timidly I touch the waters
these waters so dark and uncertain
putting in my questioning toe
then waiting for some sign to go in
The vultures know where I've been
and they smell the heat of my blood
Sometimes I want to crawl to you in
the darkness and feel your heart beating
I think that will reassure the child in me
I search for signals from ordinary strangers
and shoot arrows of lust at turned backs
Bring me in from the cold with your eyes
let my life dry out by your fires
I am a dog/stray from nowhere
find my master/get me there safely
I search the scoured corners of life
picking at the bleaching bones for
the life that will feed my hunger
I am a Pilgrim in the world
unsure and afraid my beliefs will be mocked
set firmly upon this grey and grim path
by someone who is not coming back
I eternally search the horizon for the
smoke that will tell me my ship's come in
I am a dog/I have no home that feels real to me
I have lost my shape
and I cast no shadow nor leave ripples on
the surface of time
But I have seen footprints
heading into the sunshine
all the way up to the sky
and I know where they led.....

*****

GIANT

In the earth I murmur secrets
to the stars
and long for the warmth of green suns
on lazy/Spring days
my body is crusted with the jewels
of winter/my bones brittle and hard
and yet I stretch upward
rubbing my face in the sky's
blue blanket
I stand rooted in days that expand
greyly around me and freeze my legs
to this earth
but in my deepest memory I know there
will be life and it will push out green
and quivering to the warm air
and the pain that is birth will shake
me free and shade the earth.....

***

ADRIANE SAYLOR, con't.

BREAKING LIFE.

Up through the craters
through magma and rock and ice
through the fossilized histories of
  Tyrannosaurus Rex
through bright flash of bone and blood
of one million generations
crunching heart and belly
into the dust of stars
to finally flap joyfully onto the
solid shore of a new
                sane
                REALITY
I am found...heart/woman
                broken/cave mother
rocking gently in the egg until the shell
          b r e a k s...
and I fragile/yet seeking
crawl forth into the pointed light
abandoning the fragments of a past
in the deep/deep darkness.....

******

TRYING TO GET SOFT

We are trying to get soft
trying to move gently amid the
empty deserts of the world
moving and merging to obey
The Urge of The Flow
we are all looking for crawlspace
into the Temples of God
on our hands and knees
searching for diamonds
among the grains of sand
The world is a teacup and we are
in it
Futures unformed/unbreathed by
The creator
we rub our backs against the Universal door
and charge the acres of our minds
we move/we change
trying to get soft
growing in The Flow.....

******

JANICE LeFEVERS

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Bites, nips,
gouges.
I'm being eaten alive.
Pieces all strewn;
Scrambling to retrieve
enough of them to survive.
But after I salvage myself
for the main course,
Will I still be a snack
for the rats in a pack
who are unable
to reach the table?

TRADITION

Sunday.
Day of Worship.
Day of Rest.
An outcast is what you'll feel,
if you don't approve the seal
on family dinners
after family worship.
Woe to us sinners
who cannot parade
in dress-up clothes
acting out a charade;
And then sit down
to tribunal meals,
full of juicy gossip,
of how one feels
about the neighbors,
who have just left,
in Sunday best,
hurrying,
so not to be late
to celebrate
their own gab-fest;
And so it continues.
Sunday.
Day of Worship.
Day of Rest.
With Hypocrisy as the well-fed honored guest.

****

MIDDLE AGE CRISIS

What a joke it would be
to find on our last day
that all we didn't do
because we "shouldn't"
didn't matter anyway.
Impropriety, our big fear;
All those years wasted
when life could have tasted
like full-bodied wine
instead of stale beer.
Who benefits from "goodness"
that suffers inside
knowing there is no reason
for us to imbibe,
and so we resist
because we cannot dare
to claim our rightful share
of a piece of the pie.
Sure, what we want
isn't always what we need
but considering the soul we have to feed,
Isn't pure desire reason enough
to heed its urging call
rather than retire
not having known its fire at all?

*****

I WONDER

A coupling in sin.
Living in purgatory,
until "death do us part."
Would it have been
the same hell
for heavenly angels?
No one can tell.

**

MICHAEL VOLLMER

THE OBSERVER

Why play to the audience?
(so smiles and rosy cheeks)
Shuffling feet as the gentle sighs
caress from every corner.
Long waiting...watching...feeling
like a well-lit island
sandy beach heart
that has short lived impressions,
planted by impassioned lovers
moving swiftly toward something else.

SOME GIRLS

Oh, you dark splashes of restrained surrender.
Your lips gently parted to let fly
another quiet lie.
Your hypnotic movements truthfully swaying
a headlong fall.
I thank you for the spaces you send to me
and for the silent promises to keep.

LUCKY TWENTY-ONE

He was falling. His stomach felt like it was up around his ears. It was too dark to see, but his ears were telling him that he was rapidly descending. What was taking so long? If death was impending, where was the flash of his life before him?

A voice whispers, "Here it comes." No, that was just the wind whistling past his ears.

His pre-adolescence was spent in poverty still thinking he could have anything he wanted. Puberty rushed him headlong at homely girls who shared his interest in human anatomy, taking over when his fear exceeded his curiosity. Twenty one brought him luck. Despite a continuing feeling of doom and an unconscious manuever towards failure, he succeeded.

While attending a state teachers college an empty-eyed co-ed fell in love with him. His feeling for failure was not enough to frighten her off. They were married. He worked at avoiding the long arm of her father's fortune until he ran right into it. A week before they were to graduate her parents were killed in Italy by the Red Brigade. The newlyweds inherited a fortune.

He bought sleek expensive cars to put through breakneck paces, chasing time through city streets. He gladly paid the tickets. Money made his life so simple and uncomplicated.

His head exploded. Was this death? His senses came back slowly. No, he was still falling, vainly waiting for another whisper.

She was brilliant. She bought a seat on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and nearly doubled her liquid assets in the first three quarters, (nine months). Her husband was pleasant if distant. When he looked her in the eyes his focus was through her eyes clear through to the back of her head where she hid her dreams. She loved him.

The roaring was boxed-ears echos ear-to-ear. Why was it taking so long? Another explosion in his head. The winds were pulling his legs, twisting him like a kite tail.

He lived in the third person. Sliding in and out of rest areas along the interstate at 135 mph in his deep gold Lotus, he approached the first person. At twenty-one he turned lucky. He destroyed three cars, seven hundred feet of chain link fence, two out buildings, two hundred and forty square feet of turf, a row of eleven Hawthorn shrubs, and always walked away with scratches.

She had two affairs. A sporatic clutch of afternoon interludes with the junior partner of the accounting firm that kept her books and a weekend with a female cousin of her husband who was visiting in the middle of divorce. Her weekly matrimonial union wasn't filling the void.

Another explosion rocks his body, surrounding him in white light. Her tears shimmering on his bloodless cheek catch his eye and drag him back slowly. He dies smiling up at her, with his face bright from the freshly cleaned chandelier. The ladder was lying at his side like a gentle dog that did not howl when his master died.

****

HOLLY TREVISAN

SONNET

The gift of life bestowed upon the child,
Who, unsuspecting, enters with a scream,
And sets about the task of growing old,
Begrudgingly is given, it would seem,
When other time consuming forces halt
The mothering so needed to fulfill
The maturation process - by default
The offspring incomplete, a void to fill.
And when adulthood comes upon the young,
And later years have settled on the old,
The past will haunt them both, with songs unsung,
And inner conflicts, stifled, take their toll.

The daughter and the mother know the lie.
Accepting imperfection breaks the tie.

THE SOLITARY DINER

He sits in the restaurant booth alone,
the empty space opposite suggesting
a life long companion
lost,
making his number six sirloin last
well beyond the meager warmth given
by the oven.

Silent, slightly stooped from
years of gainful employment,
oblivious of spoiled children stomping
their feet for dessert before
the main meal,
he fixes his gaze upon the red vinyl bench
across the table,
and makes me wonder if I will
be the solitary diner, or the void.

ADAM

He was only Six,
But already well versed in violence.
Little hands that could kill a cat with a snap
Were not allowed to touch the neighbor's babies.
Darting wild eyes in a filthy face constantly
Peered out from under porches to see if anyone
Noticed the tortured tree or trampled turf.
And his mother cried
And tried in her nice quiet way to
Tame her child.

He loved to eat dirt,
But loosening his belt and unzipping his
Pants to water the garden was just as much fun.
Work-boot clad feet were lethal weapons,
Fit for tromping, fit for stomping,
Kick your Mommy in the Shins, la-de-da.
She has the scars.
And his brother cried
And tried to understand it, but
Destruction of Private property
Hurts a lot.

He was only six,
Punching, lashing out at a world
That advocated
SPANK THE BRAT!

And his brother suffered.
And his mother suffered.
And his father was never home.

NANCY LOCKHART

WHAT DO YOU HEAR FROM REGINA?

Her hair was neither long nor short; not blonde nor brown. Her eyes were like hard blue marbles. Her thin lips neither curved nor dropped, but were held fast in an expressionless line. Her sallow skin was flawless, except for a small wart on her high forehead. She had a long thin nose with a matching chin and neck.

Under her impeccable and subdued attire she wore a hard, padded little bra over a boney chest. Her full hips and thighs were neatly girdled.

At the bottom of her long, lean legs, she kept toenails clipped short and rounded.

Regina was in the best of health, except for chronic constipation, and a slight sexual disfunction.

Her home was spotless. Her husband's business booming; and her children excelled in <u>everything</u>.

The young pleasant looking man with short brown hair and tired eyes sat in dark green work clothes; his ballpoint pen leaking into his pocket and cigarette pack. His brown shoes were off and he occasionally rubbed his odd-smelling feet in their white socks. He sat waiting, thinking, remembering:

"Those cheap cigars make me nauseous."

"Don't you think you should set an example for the children?"

"How sickening. Go brush your teeth, if you think your'e gonna kiss me after that."

"Brother Joe will be good for business. I've made arrangements. He'll start next week. You'll teach him the ropes."

"Don't you think you should call when you're late for dinner?"

"Ma, you should get a better house. That neighborhood is full of truck drivers and all sort of uneducated people."

"Get your filthy hands off those towels. I just cleaned this bathroom. You got my soap filthy."

"All my work and sacrifice getting you started in business and no where is my name even mentioned. You weren't such a Mister Big Shot back in Cicero."

"Candy for Mother's Day. Whata you wanna do, rot my teet?"

These remembered monologues were interrupted as the doctor came in to Regina's husband who was still waiting.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Mr. Petroski, but you're going deaf."

****

RANDY

Butter cream came in a lacey box,
All on a Valentine Day;
Not the kind put out by Brachs
But rather . . . made in the hay.

SONNET

A lady-finger meal, that's how he dines,
And chalice filled with yesterday's picked fruit.
Forgetful squire sips the aged wine;
Makes love to dowager in his silken suit.
If not a gigolo, then who will stay
With lonely lady time has played too hard?
A devious pretense to love for pay.
What games to play when Jokers are your cards?
Abundantly, she gifts him with his keep;
Returned full measure she receives his arm.
She never thinks how such a one can sleep.
A balance like blind justice; where's the harm?
Her gigolo, his lady-perfect pair.
The flutist plays for snake; the song is theirs.

NANCY LOCKHART, con't.

AND I SAID I'D NEVER WRITE ANOTHER SONNET

It's only Wednesday of my afternoon;
Too soon, I think, to hold the final court.
My only gown is drying in the moon.
I can't recall if starboard side, or port.
The wind is blowing Thursday in my face.
Can you, Sir, wait to chart this astral course?
In high-hell shoes I cannot keep this pace.
Perhaps there's time to catch a Friday horse.
My hair's undone, my fingers have no paint.
Perhaps a touch of tempera and a rake
In honor of sweet Vitus, dancing saint.
Wednesday ashes, a calendar's mistake.

Titanic woman, who have you to thank?
The band stopped playing when the dancers sank.

I KNOW THE WORDS

I know the words
To Ophelia's script
I've heard the curtain call.
I've toe-danced
On the perimeters of
Its muddy puddles;
But Jacob's Ladder
Rung by rung
In my head, until
I wiped my shoes
In the grass of my mother,
and ran home to watch
Captain Kangaroo.

MINUTE MYSTERY

"Yes, dear, but it's been a hard winter for everyone in Chicago. Just because you're crippled and walk with a slight gait is no reason to take it out on me. It isn't my fault that no one manufactures orthopedic rubbers. I don't care if you get fired. You are not going to work when the pavements are covered in ice. It would be suicide to go out on a day like today. Come sit down and do some more work on this," said the mother.

"I don't want to crochet anymore afgans. And I refuse to watch "The Young and The Restless." I could write my own version of that one, let me tell you," Edgar announced as he picked up marbles with his deformed toes. And then the phone rang and Edgar lost his balance and fell upon the marbles, trying to get to the kitchen before his mother.

"It's for you sweetie," she hollered through to him.

"Oh, what the hell, Mr. Brocoly. There'll be other cashier jobs. I can understand why you have to let me go. I'm just not dependable in this kind of weather. Listen, business is business. I never expected any special treatment. Well, I'll be seeing you, Mr. Brocoly. Have a nice day." Edgar set the receiver quietly in its cradle. "Fuck the bastard," he muttered, so his mother wouldn't hear him, and he went into the living room without a word and began to double-crochet.

Later in the afternoon when Edgar decided to tell his mother about being fired, she interrupted him.

"Edgar, you're wonderful company, but let's not talk while my story is on. This is the part where Emery finds out that his wife has a social disease." And then during the commercial, "Why don't you call Mrs. Crafono and see if she's interested in selling your afgans on consignment. Tell her you won't take a penny less than thirty dollars for the granny squares, and forty-five for the daisy stitched."

Edgar gave up trying to fill his idle weeks with what his mother called yarn-carpentry. Instead he became obsessed with an idea he got from reading THE STAR, a newspaper his mother bought at the grocery store. The more he played with his idea, the more his depression lifted. The plan could not be executed until the first thaw. Edgar could wait.

con't.

MINUTE MYSTERY, con't.

Several days later, Edgar was awakened by the sun shining in his face. Puddles were flooding the streets and sidewalks. Edgar knew this would be the day. In his excitement he tripped over his high brown shoe and was jabbed in the thigh by its metal brace. The thought of a time he had gone to Minnesota to a Kathryn Kuhlman healing service crawled into his mind.

"Someone in the back section has been suffering from polio. Come up and claim your cure!" Edgar's heart pounded and his mother's elbow prodded him. He limped hurriedly up the long aisle towards the stage. Just before he reached Miss Kuhlman, Edgar tripped over the footrest of someone's discarded wheelchair. Edgar returned to his seat with a bloody nose.

Edgar dressed himself, and without eating breakfast left in his Volkswagon, while his mother was on the kitchen phone trying to reach Wally Phillips with the answer to the Minute Mystery. When Edgar reached the shopping center, he realized he'd come too early. The stores wouldn't open for another hour. He soothed his disappointment with half a dozen strawberry bismarks at Dunkin Donuts. "I'd like a cup of coffee also," he told the waitress. As he scarfed down the last donut, he felt suddenly nauseated. It wasn't the overeating that gave Edgar the queasy sensation. The feeling came on him as he watched the waitress take a thin napkin from the metal holder, blow her nose in loud, thick, bursts; then return to filling the casement shelves with glazed donuts.

Edgar left chuckling to himself and thinking, "if they weren't glazed before, they sure are now."

Back at the shopping center the big department stores were still closed. Edgar found what he wanted at Walgreens, and headed down the highway again for home. On the way he stopped at the same Dunkin Donut shop. "A dozen of the glazed," he told the girl.

"Edgar, where were you? I made oatmeal, but it's kind of cooled off. Take some nice stewed prunes and I'll warm the cereal a bit," his mother greeted him as he arrived home.

"No thanks, Ma. I'm not hungry. Here. I bought something for you." He handed her the donut box.

"Edgar, you're so thoughtful. Nevermind if you walk like Hop-a-long Cassidy. You're a thoughtful son. I always tell my friends that, Edgar. Now I don't mean to suggest that Hop-a-long Cassidy was crippled. He walked as well as I do. That was just his name..."

"I get your drift."

"Oh, that reminds me. Harry Volkman told me that we are going to get another snow storm."

"What do you mean Harry Volkman told <u>you</u>. You make it seem like you had a conversation with the man, Ma."

"Well, I did. I called the station this morning. When I couldn't get through to Wally Phillips, I thought I'd try Harry, and sure enough."

"That's nice, Ma. But couldn't you just listen to the weather on the radio, same as everybody else?"

"I was in a hurry. You see I wanted to let your Aunt Mary know what my plans were. Anyway, the snow won't be here till late, so I'm going over there for a few hours. She's going to show me how to make toilet paper covers out of milk containers. They are such cute boutique items. I thought I could get you interested in making some, dear, for my ladies Aid Fun Festival."

Edgar silently rejoiced at the prospect of his mother's absence for the day. Easier by far to put his plan to work. As soon as her car pulled out of the driveway, Edgar stripped himself and went upstairs to get the package from Walgreens - twelve jars of Five Day Deodorant Cream. He spread the white cool gunk lavishly on every part of his skin, knowing that, in time, the pores would be unable to release perspiration, and the inevitable toxemia would do him in. It would be a clean break. He crawled under the bedcovers and waited..

The snow came sooner and heavier than Harry had predicted. The blizzard knocked out the phones and electric lines. Edgar's mother was three days at her sisters, unable to contact her son.

After several hours of sleep, Edgar was awakened by a terrible itching. His body was a mass of hives. His eyes were swollen and he could barely find his way to the bathroom. He got into the shower and sudsed himself the best he could. But the hives were swelling in his trachea and esophagus and he couldn't breathe. Moments later Edgar lost consciousness under the stream of hot water. He convulsed, and died quickly...

Epilogue: "Anphalictic shock. That's what the doctors called it. I just want to warn other mothers, Wally. You can't trust those chemicals they put in our food and cosmetics. My Edgar might have been handicapped but he was always clean and thoughtful. Oh, and Wally, I'd like a try at your Minute Mystery as long as I have you on the telephone."

*****

JUDY BELFIELD

DO THE "FUNERAL" WITH YOUR PARTNER

At ten o'clock one sunny morn,
I stepped out of my car.
A church bell's steady peal, forlorn,
Resounded from afar.
A question formed within my brain,
"Which Holy Day was this:
Whose birthday rite? which martyr slain?
Ascension? or St. Chris?"
The first of March. "Assumption? - No.
Nor Paul or Virgin Blest.
Not Chris; they shelved him long ago."
My mind was put to test.
Reflecting on the time of day
Gave me the crucial clue.
"The Mass for those who've passed away!"
My wit had cleared the stew.
Not holy day, but for the dead
The bells kept mournful time.
At this recall, out loud I said,
"That's it! It's Funeral Time!
Boogety-boogety-boogety-shoop."

NEPTUNE'S TRIUMPH

Beware! Beware! Beware the sea!
He swelled one day and swallowed me.
He roared and shook his forceful head;
He bellowed out, "I'm glad she's dead."
And lo! Below his bubbling hair
He rolls and holds me in his lair.

So here I lie beneath the foam;
A spuming froth which marks my home.
I watch the world through his green eyes
And know that I will not arise
For lo! Below the sovereign sea
Am I and will forever be.

A CHASM OF DEMENTIA

You think there's no way out but to be dead;
That no one really cares to hear your cry
For help to solve the puzzle in your head.
You thrash alone in here and now and why,
And wonder if your yesterdays make sense.
If only one attentive ear would heed
Your silent screams and rush to your defense!
If just one comprehending eye could read
The aching torment written on your face,
Perhaps the throes of madness would disperse
And you could find a sane and sturdy space,
Humanely distant from your raging curse.
Oh god! How can you suffer all that pain?
I hear; I see; Can't you be you again?

MIKE ARE SPARED

Religious education, like the trash,
Was dumped upon us children every year.
I had no reason then to sort the mash
Of thought regarding God; 'twas all so clear
My teachers, veiled in black, had such a flair
For rousing terror in the children's souls.
With stories of damnation, they could scare
A passion to avoid the blazing coals.
Each night, I fantasized impending death
And Hades taking me, if un-"confessed".
The Reaper'd come, lest I could hear my breath
And feel my heart beat strongly in my chest.
Oh, why should little children shed the tear
And spend their precious years of youth in fear!

JUDY BELFIELD, con't.

TO A POETIC EINSTEIN

Somewhere in that convoluted maze
of thoughts in your head,
I'm sure a path of lucidity
exists for YOU.

As you speak your verses,
I'm fascinated
by the ingenious way you tailor words
to mellifluously fit each other like spoons stack together
in a kitchen drawer.
But it's the stacking I can't comprehend.

The words, themselves,
gleaned from that well-worn
thesaurus in your mind,
are easily enough understood.
But that flamboyant flourish
with which you conjoin them
and the reasons behind your particular design,
mystify me.

My metronome hangs out in the waltz district
and is grievously
handicapped
when it tries to keep time
with your jitterbug.

Are you mindful
of my dilemma?
Or are your compositions
a calculated effort
to alienate me?

DISILLUSION

As fingers of sunlight
wriggled through the horizon
and danced in the dawn
over gardens, cold and bare,
You promised the flowers and spring.

Was it not this morning,
in the mist,
that I believed you -
Naive little schoolgirl
that I was?

I stood on that hilltop
Waiting
for grass to flourish in the meadow
so I could thread bare toes in its leaves;
Waiting
to breathe the exhilarating fragrance
of blossoms as they ripen
Waiting
to absorb the intense anxiety to live
with which all of nature's offspring are saturated.

But the days fumbled over
and battered their sameness
into one another
and I walked away.

The morning wasn't today
or even yesterday.
Yet somehow,
the innocent, adolescent gullibility
of me
struggles to survive.

FOR ANOTHER JUDY

How come you called me
when you didn't have anything to say?
Your anxious voice aaid,
"Hi, whatcha doin'?"

I told you about
My dishwasher needing repair
and that
I was out of sugar.
I said I thought
I needed to change
My perfume, because
My "trademark" was getting too common.
I told you a joke I'd heard
that you didn't seem to think funny,
and
I detailed the events
of several domestic episodes
that had made the last week or so exciting for
Me.

We passed an hour of time on the phone
and your only verbal contributions
were "Um" and "Um-hmm".

You know,
sometimes you exasperate me!
You can really bring a person down.
I call you up;
I'm in a good mood;
and you don't talk.

Oh-that's right-
you called me.
So,
How come you called me
if you didn't have anything to say?

SNOWFALL

Tiny, crystalline, opalescent shavings
Pared from the upper regions of a lilac-lacquered sky
Like feathers, released from a megaton pillow
They float down over the earth
And merge to form a bulky, velutinous quilt.
Tufting here and drifting there,
They weld themselves to arms of trees
and bellies of barren fields . . .
and cushion sounds.

Tires,
Whose everyday whirr
as they speed their way on asphalt,
Undergo a sonoric metamorphosis
and reverberate in stifled, squashing rythmn.
And church bells,
Whose clang and jangle of yesterday,
Now strike a fuzzy, muzzled melody.

Hush!
Don't speak
And break the sacred still.
Some things,
Like snowfall and innocence,
Are best left as they are . . .
for awhile.

JUDY BELFIELD, con't.

AND YOU ASK ME IF I LOVE YOU!

Broad-backed, no-assed defensive lineman
propped on long, thick legs
that seem to shake the ground
with wide, flat-footed steps --
Gorilla arms dangling in their thirty-three inch sleeves --
Softly curling hairs
flattened against the skin of your Merlin Olsen body --
God, but you excite me!
Hairy-faced, hulking man
with furtive eyes, whose mere glance
locks what they see in a gripping vice,
Are you Rasputin Reincarnate?
Mellow, saxophone-voiced creature
of commanding stature,
with teeth that widen into lascivious grins
which lie about your thoughts --
The permanently etched furrows in your forehead
freeze your expression
in an icy scowl.
But your hands betray you
with their delicately elegant fingers
that adjust their touch as they move
from grimy steel and greasy filth
to kitten fur and hidden woman flesh
with facile agility.

Ah -- the enigma of you!
Under lobster-shelled exterior
is the second you --
a pudding-textured dessert;
an emotional knot of fragile crystal
that would be so easy to shatter.
When darkness descends
to clutch us in her palm
and all the world has shut down
isolating you with me
I can see through your falcon's eyes
and they plead with me --
beg me to say that I love you.

ABASHED MISGIVINGS

O voice of Demon-Insecurity --
"Not good enough; no good at all," he blurts.
"Your writing reeks of rank impurity,"
He jabs his piercing dagger where it hurts.
"You think that you can prosper in a world
That has already Steinbeck, Twain and Keats?"
His caustic cape of scornful words unfurled,
He smites me till my confidence depletes.
"Just glance around," he sneers with black disdain,
"The students in your class outstrip your 'skill'."
With arrogant contempt, he wields the pain
That wickedly reduces me to nil.
Malefic Fiend of diabolic art
Desist the mocking jeers that rip my heart!

AUTOCRAT IN EMBRYO

I am a colossus of self-assurance;
Preening peacock --
vainglorious hawk,
irridescent feathers
flashing
multicolored sprinkles in the sun --
Prancing stallion --
mane fluttering in ruffled air --
beautiful,
leonine beast,
tossing golden forelock with aplomb;
Condescending snob,
stooping casually,
infrequently,
to note the passing streams
of plebians
who crawl
and squiggle
beneath my perfect heels.
I do not concern myself
with these pretenders
to the purple;
they who lack
the select caliber of my intelligence
and my superlative breeding.
They cannot hope
to approach
or understand
my excellent wit
or
the nobility of my aspirations.
Even those few,
fortunate enough to possess
self-esteem
in quantity equal to mine,
cannot possess it
in the same
untarnished quality.

I am the creme de la creme;
the transcendence of the usual;
the surpasser of the ordinary.
I am unique, peerless, unparalleled.
In my agnostic world --
I may even be
God.

LINGERING SHADOWS

"Hope is like the sun, which, as we journey toward it,
casts the shadow of our burden behind us."
Samuel Smiles

"How do you feel today?" he asked, closing the walnut door behind him.

I had been sitting for ten minutes, hugging the corner of the burnt orange sofa, one of its pillows nestled in my lap, waiting for the entrance of William R. Pryor, M.D., psychiatrist, deacon of the distraught.

"I don't know yet. It's too early to tell."

I glanced at my watch: Ten-o-three a.m. I must be sure that today's visit lasted until three minutes past eleven, so I'd get my full hour.

"I loathe mornings," I added, accent heavily on the word 'loathe'. I realized at once that I had let escape a sentence which would require an explanation I wasn't in the mood to give. An idea flashed quickly through my mind: Maybe the doctor might roll some thoughts around in his head and come up with some unexpected, clever retort, like "So do I", that would eliminate the necessity of my having to account for the remark. A second flash illuminated the fact that

con't.

this would be ludicrously uncharacteristic. In an abstract one-sided game of "Can you Top This," I challenged my unenlightened foe to a silent battle of wits, which when converted into words, lost its enchantment. Years of listening to game-playing ploys had hardened him against them, I suspected, since he never took the bait I laid for him. But it was my fifty dollars! If I chose to use it playing games, he ought to have respected that option. I wasn't surprised when he posed the inevitable question.

"Why do you hate mornings?"

"I just do," was my flippant reply. His reticence to lock horns with my whimsy of the moment irked me. I decided to hold back: Maneuver Number One. Holding back was a powerful strategy. A two-year-old seated on a potty chair, withholding his treasure can torment the hell out of an exasperated mother. This shrink was frustratingly difficult to torment or exasperate. He seemed devoid of expression and emotion, his features locked in concentrated blandness.

This was my third visit to Dr. Pryor's magic castle of emotional revelation. The two preceding sessions had been remarkably lackluster. He had asked me about my relationships with my mother, father, and children. I tossed these questions off; nonchalantly got rid of them with masquerade retorts. The surface scratching direction that my psychoanalysis was taking both annoyed and relieved me. With a fierce determination to conceal, I steered his probings away from the chaotic crater that gaped behind the wall of camouflage I had built. An alarming panic seized me at the mere thought of stepping too near the stone partition, terrified that the ground in that vicinity would disintegrate underfoot and crumble the wall, exposing the abyss. I had peered into the chasm but once: The writhing tangle of yello-fingered, clawing demons of insanity, green drool salivating on their overbaked chins, clutched for me; anticipated with glee, my fall into their hunch-backed cretin company.

No. I wouldn't be the one to guide this clinician of the deranged over the cryptic ground that led to the grisly precipice. Let him guess. Let him find the way unaided, while I observed, uninvolved. He could then come up with some multisyllabic term for my particular type of madness and slap me with a prescription for a capsule cure-all that would make me happy again.

Irritation flared within, because he lacked the ability to read between my lines, and to supernaturally perceive unspoken words. Maneuver Number Two: "Look at Me -- Can't you FEEL What I'm Thinking?" This maneuver had to be used sparingly. The colossal attacks of anxiety that followed the employment of this tactic left my skin in a condition not unlike that of an apple in a too-hot oven. The threat of explosion must be avoided; temper must be controlled at any price.

So how did I get into this situation in the first place! My mind was filled with contradictions, like a barrel stuffed with coat hangers, hopelessly knotted together in tangled disarray.

In one year, I survived the humiliating obscenity that only one who's been through the depersonification of hospital tests, can appreciate. My pocket calendar was liberally splattered with appointments for x-rays, scans, encephalograms, cardiograms and lab tests for every conceivable malady. I was pushed, poked, rolled, jabbed and prodded so thoroughly, that I really believed I was the proverbial "piece of meat" that lacked intelligence, essence, or even humanity. To what end?

"There is nothing physically wrong with you," the same prognosis echoed repeatedly in my ears. I had known it from the beginning: The achings in my lower back; the throbbings in my neck; the scraping pains that scooped my stomach with grating teeth; these were all my body's way of complaining about the dementia that was overtaking my brain. It didn't matter much. I was just a zombie, going through the motions of pseudo-living.

A farce -- life. I knew it was only a temporary existence in preparation for death. Cruel God, tempting me with a promise of vitality, of purpose that simply wasn't there. What did anything matter? Why did anyone bother to smile; to frown; to feel? It made no difference; we were all going to end up dead anyway.

My scampering kitten disturbed me. Darting from couch to chair to table. Why didn't it just lie down and wait for its inescapable enfinish?

One morning, I awakened to pulsating flickers of electric streaks on the wall beside my bed. These phosphorescent glitterings danced in heartbeat rythmn, bouncing from the inside of my eyeballs to wherever I directed my gaze. Were it not for a head-achy lethargy that permeated throughout my body, I might have enjoyed the display of lights being staged for me. Crawling off the side of the mattress, I found myself unable to stand. My legs weren't there!

Well, this was it. Death had come to carry me off, and was beginning its process in my lower extremities. I lay down in the middle of the blue-carpeted bedroom floor, resigned to oblivion. I wondered why I feared its coming for so

con't.

long. It wasn't bad; there was no pain; just a numbing sensation that travled slowly upward, killing by inches.

I think the numbness had reached my tongue, when I threw up. And then, a very urgent dilemma presented itself; I was either going to lie here while the product of a sudden attack of diarrhea made its presence known, or I was going to overcome my paralysis and run to the toilet. I didn't spend too much time deliberating over my choices. As if by the wave of a fairy's wand, muscles returned to the limbs that carried me swiftly to the commode. While seated on the throne of excretion, nature played her ace.

A blinding crash of excruciating misery erupted in my head. Wretched spasms stretched the inside of my skull. The fuse had been lit; explosion was imminent. Quickly finishing up in the bathroom, I ran to the living room and sprang for the couch. I wrapped my arms around my head to keep it from bursting and moaned sporadically.

The blowup never came. The convulsive raging continued for two days and then it stopped. Three days later, the flashing lights reappeared and the whole process repeated itself. I'd never thought of decapitation as a means of committing suicide, but the idea became appealing.

The day after the second onslaught, I again found myself under the droning buzz of the brain scan machine; radioactive therapy department.

This time I'd struck gold. There was no tumor; no epilepsy, but I had now become the proud owner of "something physically wrong" - migraine.

Prescription and referral to Dr. William Pryor in hand, I left the hospital triumphantly.

The morning that my third session with the psychiatrist was scheduled, was one of those gray, drizzly ones that conjure up gray drizzly feelings. I was filled with optimism. It was the perfect atmosphere for opening up hidden compartments in my head.

Driving to the doctor's office was a test of my husband's ability to keep his mouth shut. He knew I didn't want to talk. He said nothing: The momentum and direction of my mood remained intact.

"He tries so hard to understand," I thought, feeling a deep sympathy for this man who lived with me, now bewildered and helpless to comfort me.

Disembarking listlessly from the car at the entrance of the tall office building, my thoughts were asea, as though trapped in a Winslow Homer painting. Droplets of rain spattered my face as I gazed up, locating the sixth floor window - guardian of whispered secrets. After the long, elevatored, corridored walk, I found myself on the other side of that window, privy to my own secrets, as yet, unwhispered. I reread the seven framed diplomas in the office; envied this man for the knowledge he had acquired. Selecting the corner of the couch nearest the window, I tucked my feet under my legs, clutched a pillow and waited for my salvation to walk through the door.

And here we were, discussing the all-important problem of why I hated mornings.

"If you don't want to talk about why you dislike mornings, what would you like to talk about?" he asked in his unruffled detached manner.

Considering the possibilities of this question put me to test. What I wanted to talk about could not be contained in my allotted hour. What I wanted to say would expose the dimensions of my neurosis. I wasn't sure I was ready for exposure.

"Close the lid; leave it in; you'll get over it in time," the voice of Id commanded. And I in my cowardly crouch, obeyed.

"I'd like to discuss that painting over your desk," I replied, "It annoys me."

"Why?"

I became suspicious. I knew about inkblots, and this painting was a riot of orange diagonal lines and splashes, criss-crossing one another. I began to think the picture was a plot; subterfuge planted to plumb the niches of psychological data-bank.

"It just seems to me, that a painting with that kind of confusion is not appropriate in a psychiatrist's office - where people come to get un-confused."

"Not too revealing a response," Id smugly remarked.

Pryor stopped, unblinking, his eyes urging me to continue. It was either keep talking or endure that damned uncomfortable stare. I chose to walk over to the window and check the weather. I watched the rain bouncing on surrounding buildings and disappearing into large wet stains. It had accelerated from the thin drizzle of when I'd left home, to a pelting cascade of elongated drops. Sheets of it streamed down the window before me in irridescent translucence.

"Poor gray day," I mumbled.

"What?"

I felt a gush of tears walling up, as his voice invaded my muted reverie. My thoughts returned to the office, realizing I wasn't alone. At once, I spun toward him, an unfamiliar ferocity gripping me, and blurted in uncontrolled staccato, "Aren't we ever going to talk? Aren't you ever going to make me take off the mask? Jesus Christ, I'm dying! I'm dying, and all everybody does is stand around and watch."

Collapsing on the sofa with shuddering

con't.

LINGERING SHADOWS, con't.

sobs I could not squelch, I covered my face with the pillow.

"I can't stand it anymore! I can't live with this pain. Everybody's alive and I'm dead and nobody cares!" This I screamed into the pillow loud enough, clear enough for him to hear.

There was nothing more to say.

In the wake of the outburst, I was afraid to raise my head and look at him. I didn't want to see his face, judgment written in his eyes. I'd lost control, and my body still pulsated with fear. Soon the jerking quiver would cease, and waves of relief would begin ebbing through me; scummy water oozing down the bathtub drain; molasses lazily dripping down the side of its bottle. Relaxation akin to the languid feeling of post-orgasm becalmed me.

"Are you ready to talk now?" he asked.

"No. I want to go to sleep. I want to go home."

"How do you feel?"

"I'm just . . . so . . . tired," the words came forth with effort. He looked at me with a half-smile that really did'nt change his unchanging expression and said, "You know-you've broken ground. If you think you can wait until Thursday, we can begin to dig."

"Thursday's fine," I said.

On the street again, people passing were still faceless, but distinct human forms had taken shape from the blob of flesh that once joined them all together en masse. They weren't lemmings marching off to oblivion. If they could go about the business of living without the cloud of death tormenting them - stooping to tap their shoulders and issue its grim guarantee-well . . .

The rain had stopped, but a graying, lavendar wash remained in watercolor crispness over the sky. Perhaps the sun would shine tomorrow, but even if it didn't, I knew it was there.

****

PAT MULDER

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

Looking at
Rousseau's jungle
hanging on the wall
as it has been
for years,
I notice a man
being mauled by a leopard
right in the middle
of the picture
where there was
neither man nor leopard
just last week.
Yes, I know.
They must have been there
all the while.

Tell me, then -
if I didn't see
the man and leopard
until this very moment,
what will I see
next week
that I am
not aware of today?

LETTING GO

She smiled, a gentle memory caressing her,
filling her empty day.
"I enjoyed being pregnant," she said,
her words of elemental honesty
tossed off as an amusement,
echoing in her hollow room, reminding her
that nothing shatters the motherly vessel
as much as releasing a child,
her child,
watching him climb out of
her life,
shunning her faltering advice,
breaking the frail umbilical cord,
rejecting cookies baked in a womb-like oven
magical cookies invoking an image
of wing-like body wrapped,
mentally enfolding the child,
her child ---no--his child,
in a web of maternal anxiety.

The child walked out of reach,
leaving an idle jar
inside the shell of a mother
who no longer has THAT reason to exist.

PAT MULDER, con't.

SINGING THE WINTER ROAD BLUES

My rusty orange beetle and I,
both suffering from winter fatigue,
are adding up miles, 60,000 or so,
on the jungle-like paths of our state
facetiously referred to as roads
by politicians who frequent planes and trains,
thereby forever missing the thrill
of meeting a LARGE snowplow coming over the hill
while driving a small volkswagon
along Route 6, which is
temporarily narrowed to one lane
by seventy or eighty inches
of accumulated drifting snow.

Surviving this traumatic encounter,
my bug and I headed towards New Lenox,
regretfully turning down Cedar Road,
that Conestoga wagon path
that has been wedged out of
the Snowy mountains of Will County,
previously uncharted on any map.

We were slowly conquering Cedar "pass"
yesterday morning, at about fifteen below,
my bleary-eyed bug
bouncing a bongo beat
over frost-heaved ridges
thrown up every twenty feet or so
to catch the bellowing snow,
when the road reached up
and devoured a spiffy new four-wheeler
IN ONE BIG BITE, (probably breakfast)
regurgitating the bent 8-track,
(still spewing a loud disco beat
as it tumbled down the street),
where it was scrunched by a pickup truck,
one of those practical 6-cylinder jobs
with FFA stickers on every window
and a tailgate smeared
with bumper stickers reading
'pigs are beautiful', and "milk, the udder cola",
the bed not quite containing
ten rumpled bales of hay
dribbling down the road
like Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs.
(Perhaps the farmer hopes to retrace
his perilous journey,
should the marauding snow leave enough scattered hay
for his pickup truck to retrace it's way!)

We slunk silently down the street, my bug and I,
hoping the infamous road beast
was satisfied with his feast,
and would, like the troll under the bridge,
stretch out to digest
his audacious metallic buffet.
We hadn't gone very far
when a snowdrift staggered up,
shook his head, stomped his feet, and SNARLED!
Then his jaw opened wide
with a Datsun inside,
right in the path of my bug!
From the chrome I could see
he had eaten at least three-
and now had his eyes upon me.....

******

LIKE A MAPLE TREE

Like a maple tree,
I have a spigot in the side of my head,
put there years ago by my loving family
as a control mechanism.
When I became unruly, or indicated the accumulation
of a little extra energy or confidence,
they came and tapped my spigot,
draining just enough strength out of my mind
to keep me pliable and confused, unsure,
afraid I might be thought a fool
or be slapped down like a bug
if I tried to assert my thoughts
or express a new idea, a plan
that ran over the boundaries
of my preassigned lot in life.

Carrying the old tin bucket outback,
my loving family
sloshed my energies across the yard
like used scrub water, provoking the clay soil
to produce mad strands of grass, absurdly formed flowers,
in colours not even imagined by God,
and wild wooly weeds that wandered in whorling stems
that produced unruly, laughing fruits,
all mocking man's need for order and convention.
How I loved them, my children.

My family continued to tap my spigot,
often when I least expected to be drained,
and especially in the Spring,
that season of new growth and hope, when I seemed
unusually resentful of my spigot, their spigot.
Then one day, obviously overdue
to be tapped, (an oversight, I'm sure)
I thought of a plan to escape!

Cramming a big wad of juicy pink bubble gum
up the spigot, I held it in place
till it was secure - my sugar-free secret.
The next time they turned my spigot
I seemed to be dry
like an old maple tree, empty of sap,
doomed to provide shade and nothing more.
Satisfied, they went away,
turning their attentions
to younger, more difficult spigots.

I took the advantage,
creeping unnoticed out of their woods
wearing my plugged spigot like a battle scar.
I was enthralled with my new freedom, long overdue.
I'm stronger now, a little more confident,
re-established in new ground
of a more understanding nature.

I still wear that spigot.
Some day - not just yet, but very soon,
I'll pluck that thing out of my head,
using another wad of bubble gum
to seal up the hole in my mind.
Then I'll mount my trophy,
that rusty old spigot,
up on the wall, bubble gum and all,
so my family will know
how I feel about me -

This tree is free.

PAT MULDER, con't.

AS COLD AS THE CRYSTAL SNOW

As cold as the crystal snow
descending out of the death-like darkness,
I walk under the soft white pines-
sensing the stark silence
of a world
waiting for the arrival of a prince
who will set into movement
myriad motions of energy,
transforming the dormant land
into enchanted fields
of green, glimmering hope.

I would not be that prince
who renews a sleeping world,
for I find an excitement
in the anticipation of Spring
as it exists in the mind
that is never satisfied
by the reality.

****

LOCKED-UP WORDS

It seemed to be an ordinary evening in Spring. I locked up the house, turned out the lights, and raised the wood shades in the bedroom because I liked to watch the sky. Everybody else was already asleep, so I climbed into bed and counted the airplanes flying over the house. When they cross Route 80 they test their headlights, giving me a creepy feeling that somebody is up there watching the earth, perhaps a giant flying bird, or a vehicle from another world. I tend to have an overactive imagination.

I counted several planes, a helicopter that seemed to be monitoring the traffic on 80, and a few clouds and stars that almost looked out of place on that lofty highway. I don't remember going to sleep, but when I woke up, and I think I did, although I won't swear to it, I was in a different place.

I seemed to be in a monstrous house that had only the one room I was standing in. I was shaking and frightened almost to death. I moved back near one end of the room and looked around. The room consisted entirely of windows, reaching at least two hundred feet into the sky, joined by a multi-peaked glass roof that seemed to touch heaven. Just at the point where the windows and roof joined, there was an opening, perhaps ten foot high, supported by semi-transparent beams.

There was no light in the room, but a violent thunderstorm with constant bolts of lightning kept the room in an eerie glow, sort of bluish-black and ominous. The wind was so strong I wondered why it didn't tear the house apart, but there was not even a tremor, and strangely, the rain and wind didn't come in through the ten-foot openings above. Inching over to the window, I could see that the house was overlooking a cavernous gully that was totally dark and enveloping. I shivered and wrapped my arms around my body. The room seemed so deathly cold.

I moved back to the end of the room and covered my face with my hands for a while. Perhaps then I would find myself back in bed, although I was no longer the least bit tired. In fact, I might never go to sleep again. As I removed my hands from my face, I noticed shadows that seemed to be groups of people, standing perhaps a hundred feet out in the sky. I wondered what was holding them up.

I rubbed my eyes a little and looked again. There were people out there. They were dressed in dark shapeless clothing, as if they had been to a giant rummage sale. There were men and women, and small children. Some were holding babies. I stared at one nearby group, and, my God, there was my father, who had died five months earlier. He was with his mother and brother and several other friends and relatives who had died years before. There were some I didn't recognize, especially among the children, but my grandmother had them clustered around her, and she acted as if she knew them. They were all turned away, as if to shut me out, and they were murmuring among themselves, smiling now and then, but with very little animation. They were not moving from their positions in the group. I started to cry a little, wondering if I were dead, but it didn't seem so.

LOCKED-UP WORDS, con't.

Just then, my father turned slightly and looked in my direction. I called to him, over and over, but he seemed to see nothing, and soon he turned back to the group. I sat down. The floor was very cold, so I huddled my head over trying to make myself invisible. Perhaps I could wish myself back in bed. Then I felt the presence of something watching me, silently. I raised my head and looked carefully up towards the opening in the wall. There were people, dark ghostly people, lining the entire opening of the room. They seemed to be suspended in air. I noticed that they were all facing into the room, and were watching me, as if I was a problem that they hadn't expected.

I called to them, asking where I was, and why it was so cold and dark. There was no answer. I asked them who they might be and why they were watching me. Again, no answer. They had no expressions at all, yet they seemed to have some tangible quality.

I panicked. How could I get out of this awful place. Still, they didn't seem to want to hurt me. They were just watching. I stood up and looked around the room. It was totally empty, except for one oblong table, made of some fine wood, standing in the middle of the room. How nice that would be in my house, I thought, and the idea of home jolted my mind back to my situation. I walked over near the table, perhaps about fifteen feet away. It was then that I noticed the box.

It was small, about the size and shape of a cigar box. It was made out of some dark patterned wood, perhaps teak or walnut. I was sure it was handmade. There were two little gold hinges on the back, and a tiny latch on the front. It was not locked, but the opening seam appeared to have fused together. I walked around the table looking at the box, wondering what it contained. If I touched it, I thought to myself, would those fearful people swoop down and get me? I backed off a few feet and looked again.

Then I noticed the figures. There were three of them, attached to the top of the box. I looked carefully and could see that they were part of the lid. Somebody had carved them and the lid out of the same piece of wood. I could not see what the figures were, but they appeared to be shapes of people or animals. Suddenly I was very frightened. I backed up a little more and looked up. There was no movement.

"Please," I said to no one person in particular. "May I open that box? I must know what is inside the box. Please."

I ran around the room, looking at each of the suspended figures. I held my arms out as if to plead.

"Please. You have to let me open that box. I must know." I began to cry hysterically. I fell to the floor. It was so cold. I felt as if I had turned to ice, and my heart curled up in a knot. Then I heard a slight rustle, and a faint echoing whisper:

"It's too late. There are words in that box, words that are lost to you forever."

The sky broke out in a burst of fury. The wind picked up strength, shrieking around the room as if to cleanse the scene of my presence. I felt detached and no longer afraid. I realized I could never know what the box contained.

"My father," I explained. "He had a box exactly like that one. He kept it on his dresser at home. Since he died, I can't find it. I've looked everywhere."

I raised myself on my knees and looked around. The room seemed impassive and unfeeling. The tears were running down my face onto the floor. I pounded my fists on the floor and cried:

"Why? All those years he kept those words locked in that box. He never let me know what was in the box, and now, it's too late."

*****

The box, three carved figures on top,
is guarded by the dead.
Not opened, it contains the words
my father never said.

PAT MULDER, con't.

THE WAITING ROOM

Mary Burns was awake long before dawn, waiting for the day to begin so that it might end. By nine o'clock she was sitting in the parlor watching the postman work his way down the street. She had the door opened before he reached her porch.

"Good morning, Tom," she said anxiously. "Is there a letter for me?"

"No, Mary, only a few bills today. You haven't had a letter from your son in weeks, have you?"

"Oh, Jimmy is so busy with his new job. Since he moved his family to New Jersey, he seldom writes me. He did call, though, when I was in the hospital last month."

"Why, an only son should show more concern for his poor mother, living all alone, and sick, too," Tom said. "How are you feeling today?"

"Not at all well, Tom. In fact, I have to go downtown today to the hospital clinic and start my chemotherapy treatments."

"It certainly is a cold bitter day to go on such an errand, Mary."

"Yes, it surely is. The wind chills me right to my bones. Well, perhaps you'll have a letter for me tomorrow."

Mary closed the door and carried the mail into her parlor. Since her husband had died in 1951, she had lived alone in the old house, with only a small annuity and a widow's pension, hardly enough anymore to provide for her simple needs. She had changed the house very little since they bought it in 1933. The parlor's dark mahogany furniture, antimacassars, and large green fern standing guard in front of the lace-curtained bay window gave Mary a feeling of security.

Mary was a very tidy lady, fine-boned and fragile like the piece of delicate lace she was working on. She wore her grey hair in a short curly bob that was popular when her husband was alive, and her clothes were those she had when her husband died. Today she was wearing a brown gabardine suit with a short peplum at her waist and a straight skirt that ended very properly just below her knees. Her brown felt hat had a veil of just the right length, dotted with brown velvet, and her coat was a practical beige. This was her favorite outfit, and she needed to look nice today, because she was alone and very afraid.

She fussed with her hair and her veil a few minutes, then picked up her soft brown leather purse and gloves, and walked to the corner bus stop. She considered going back home for a few seconds, but when the bus arrived, she reluctantly climbed the steps and looked around. Finding a seat beside a young mother and her baby, she smiled carefully at the pair.

"What a beautiful baby," she said.

"Thank you," the mother said, beaming. "Her name is Jennifer."

"I have a son. He lives in New Jersey. I haven't seen him for five years. He was a wonderful baby!"

"You must miss him very much," the mother replied. "Are you going shopping downtown today?"

"No, I'm not going shopping. I have an appointment with a doctor. I was in the hospital last month. I have a small tumor that couldn't be removed, so I'm going to start chemotherapy treatments today. The doctors are hopeful these treatments will help me. I don't even know exactly what these treatments are. Of course, it isn't serious."

"Of course not," the young mother said, kindly. "I'm sure you'll be fine. She looked quickly out at the passing traffic. "I think we are downtown already!"

"Oh, dear, here is my stop! Driver, please, this is my stop."

Mary stood up and paused a minute, smiling at the baby. "Goodby, pretty Jennifer," she said, and slowly moved to the door of the bus, her careful smile turning towards each person she passed as she moved, as if to suspend time for eternity right there on the bus

Stepping off the bus, she walked neatly towards the clinic on the next corner. The hospital building, once an elegant old lady, was crumbling and wearing at the edges. Mary felt a sudden kinship with the proud building. She patted her stocking seams into place and walked inside.

The interior of the building was in terrible condition. It was obvious that the maintenance staff had long ago recognized the hospital to be beyond repair. The plaster cracked open at every corner and large paper posters had been taped to the walls to cover most of the larger flaws. Each length of the floor was a different mottled color, and the woodwork trim pieces had long since been misplaced.

Mary knew from her previous visit that the hospital was soon to be torn down. Only a handful of departments remained in the clinic until their space was finished in the replacement hospital under construction across the street. The new building, all bright steel and glass, hardly looked like a hospital to Mary.

"Everything changes," Mary exclaimed to the empty hall. "I don't understand this world anymore. Maybe I should go back home."

con't.

THE WAITING ROOM, con't.

Mary stood quietly in the hall, not noticing the nurse who walked swiftly down the hall, startling Mary with her firm voice:

"May I help you," the nurse asked. "What department are you looking for?"

"Please, I have to find the chemotherapy department, nurse. I think I'm lost."

"Just take that elevator down that hall," the nurse replied, pointing about thirty feet down the hall. "Get off at the third floor."

Mary thanked the nurse and found the elevator. She was pleased to find an elderly man running it, although she noticed his poor eyesight caused him to miss each floor by a few inches. We all have little troubles like that when we get older, Mary thought, but that doesn't mean we can't be useful.

She climbed the step out of the elevator, thanking the operator softly, and followed the posters and cracks to the chemotherapy department. She noticed many people sitting in rows of chairs, waiting. They all quickly glanced up at Mary, hardly raising their heads, and then just as quickly returned to their vacant postures.

Mary braved a thin little smile and walked over to an empty chair. Placing her gloves and coat neatly on the chair, she looked around the room. Everybody else was very still. Mary walked over to the young nurse at the desk.

"How many treatments will I need, nurse? Are they expensive?"

"The doctor will decide that today," the nurse replied in a comforting voice. "Please sit down."

Mary noticed the doctor standing across the room talking to a recorder. She hurried over to try and talk to him.

"Will I be very sick? Will I need help at home? I have no one there, you know.

"We'll take care of you and try and answer your questions," the doctor replied, fumbling with his recorder. "Please go sit down and wait."

Mary turned and looked carefully at the waiting crowd. They looked up at her again for a moment, then lowered their collective eyes to the floor to avoid her questioning face. She noticed how gaunt and grim they all seemed, slumping in their chairs like empty shells, not speaking, not looking at each other, just waiting.

Suddenly frightened, she walked briskly over to the next section.

"My, it's cold today," she said to the middle-aged Negro nurse.

"Yes, it sure is," the nurse replied, rubbing her hands together as she remembered the weather outside. "May we help you here?"

"No, I'm waiting for my first chemotherapy treatment. My doctor says they may be helpful. Do you think so?"

"Well, I certainly hope so. Please go sit down and try to relax. You won't have very long to wait."

Reluctantly, Mary walked back to her own section. She realized that the other patients had been watching her with empty eyes but had turned their heads downward as she went back to her chair. She felt an ice-cold wave of truth run through her body, and was held motionless by a fear that she was afraid to understand. Then, regaining movement, she slowly and carefully walked over and took her seat among the other patients, to wait.

*****

A CHILD'S VIEW OF W.W. II

I was only six when we moved to Chicago. My dad had been working at Great Lakes building barracks, and there was lots of talk about war. I didn't know what that meant to us, but my Dad thought we should move. He said it would mean work when times got bad. In Harvey I had the routes of the horse-wagons that delivered milk and ice all figured out, because I was afraid of the way the horses looked sideways at me, and even if my Mom and Dad said the horses wouldn't hurt me, I went blocks out of my way to avoid getting looked at like that. Now I had to learn a whole new set of routes in Chicago.

Actually there was only one horse to watch out for in Chicago, and he belonged to the boy who sold produce on the next street. I got to be friends with that horse, and he didn't look at me that way. Our street had about nine houses, all on one side, and an old farm house with a herd of goats grazing in an empty field across the street. Our new school was half a block down the street, an old red brick three-story building with a gravel playground. I could hear the school bells from my bed upstairs, and I waited until the first bell to jump up and get dressed. My mother was usually very upset by then.

Right away we started getting ready for war. I was very anxious to find out what war was. All up and down the street the neighbors talked, standing outside in the early evening, watching big piles of raked leaves send up little smoke signals of fall. Most the kids, including Sandy and Jarri, my pesty younger sisters, played run-sheep-run

con't

and hide and seek, but I was one of those annoying little brats that liked to listen.

I took this task seriously, slipping silently up by my Dad and the other men, mentally recording big words like Hitler, bombs, Japan, enlisting, and how we ought to stay out of it, whatever that was. Then I went off to hover near the ladies, listening to my mother worry about how hard it was to get a refrigerator because of the war, and how she hoped they would run a gas line down the street before they ran out of pipe. They talked about Roosevelt. Some of the ladies liked him and some didn't.

My Mom and Dad didn't like Roosevelt. I found that out much earlier when I was under the breakfast table watching the heat vent blow the dust around, drying my hair. My Dad would get really mad sounding and call Roosevelt funny names, until my Mom realized I was under the table, and then I had to get up and stuff mushy cereal into my baby brother's dumb gooey mouth, and they talked about how cold it was at night now, and I KNEW that!

It was just before I turned seven that Pearl Harbour was bombed. I heard them talking about Japan, and ships sinking, and about a neighbor boy who had been killed in one of the ships. That's when I was sure war was bad. Everyone gathered in front of the radio each night, following the war. It was very important sounding, almost like the murder stories we listened to upstairs when we were supposed to be sleeping.

Not understanding all the words, I was scared because all the grown-ups were so worried. After my Mom and Dad finished the paper, I took it behind the table and spread it out on the floor, looking at the pictures and maps. I couldn't read yet, but the pictures were enough to help me figure some of it out. Of course, when my Mom was busy, I asked pesty questions that she tried to answer very nicely. I knew that when she was busy, she sometimes said more than she wanted to, and if I thought about it in bed later, I could figure out what she was talking about.

When I was eight, I could read much better, and I followed the maps just like I was looking for pirates, but I was really looking for names on the map of places where men had been killed like I heard on the radio. Some of the older guys on our street went off to war, and their mothers got to hang up a little star flag in the window. By then we had a new baby, a sister, and I heard my Mom say they didn't even want my Dad to go, and I was glad. I didn't want him to go either. We didn't get a flag for our window. Once in a while there would be a gold star in a window where there had been a blue one, and we knew a soldier had been killed who had lived in that house, and everyone was very quiet when they passed that house. I didn't want a gold star on our house. We could never be THAT quiet.

By the next year, there were shortages of meat and sugar, and all the ladies were complaining. I was old enough by now to do the grocery shopping, since my mom had just had twins, and she and the ugly babies were not very well. I didn't know why she had brought those babies home. When she put them on the sofa so I could see them, I thought they looked like little rats, and I wished she had dropped them in the ditch on the way home from the hospital. There were seven kids now, kids all over the place, and our basement was full of hanging diapers, like ghosts waiting for halloween. We all had to fold diapers every day.

Anyway, as I said, I got to do the shopping. Each week there was less in the store, and the ladies all fought over the sugar when it came in, which wasn't often. My job was to hang around the store, watching, and when the manager put out a shelf of sugar, I dived through all those chalk-white bare legs in anklets and black oxfords and grabbed a bag of sugar, backing out and away before anybody could grab my sugar. Then I slipped around the side of the meat counter, and waved to Sam, the butcher. It didn't matter how many women were fighting to be waited on, old Sam waddled over and handed me a big wrapped pot roast that he had hidden under the counter. He said he always treated his old customers best, and besides, there were all us skinny kids to be fed.

Of course, we needed coupons for the meat, but we couldn't afford all the shoes we got coupons for, so my Mom traded her shoe coupons to some of the neighbors who weren't so hungry, and they gave her meat coupons. We were never without food, although sometimes the meat was cut in awfully tiny bits. Well, I got the rest the groceries and filled my rusty red wagon, pulling it about seven blocks home from the store. When the wagon finally broke, I had to carry the groceries, and my sister came along. I didn't like her very well, but I let her carry groceries anyway. Once a man on the next street gave us a ride home, and I was glad, because my arms hurt really bad, but my Mom hollered because we shouldn't accept rides from strangers. We didn't have a car because of the war.

When I was ten, I wasn't allowed to play with the girls who lived across the street on the goat farm either. Their father was a communist. A real

con't.

communist, who talked in another language and belonged to a club that held meetings all the time. He was old and bent over, and walked with his head down, and when I said "hi" to him, he never answered me, although I didn't think he was so bad. His wife talked to me, and when my Mom was busy I went over and played with the girls, because nobody else would, and they were sort of nice. Once I played hide and seek with them after dark, and got spanked and put to bed.

When we were at school everyone talked to the girls. We knew our parents couldn't hear or see us, and we had lots of fun climbing up the edges of the brick wall, trying to make the gym window before we fell back in the bushes. Sometimes we went out in back of the school where the garbage pit was, and walked the top of the eight foot wall, betting on who would fall in the still smoking fire. Then we ran across the alley and bought dill pickles for pennies at the school store. We usually got called into the office when we did that.

Every week we had a paper drive, and we all brought our scrap paper, flat tin cans, string and metal to school to put in a big truck for the "war effort". I thought that sounded nice, and sometimes I picked up pieces of metal and things that people were still using and put those in the truck too. Then we turned in our collections of milkweed pods that would stuff a mae west vest and save a soldier's life, and all the old rubber tubes we could find. We felt very important.

Later, in our class, the teacher collected dimes for savings stamps to put in books that would buy a savings bond and help win the war. Once in a while my Mom gave me a dime for a stamp, but she didn't have many dimes, and usually I had to pretend I had forgotten my dime. It was always a relief when we started to do our papers.

The best thing that happened in school was when the air raid bells would ring right in the middle of a test, and we would all walk not run to our assigned places in the hall and sit against the wall with our heads in our arms. I sat with my sisters and brothers, since we were lined up by streets, and the two girls from the goat farm sat beside me. I wondered if we were all killed if God would let me into Heaven, since I was next to them. I decided God wouldn't mind, and probably would let them in too. We were all lined up that way so if a bomb fell, our teachers would know right away which street was killed. I thought it might be better if some of my brothers and sisters sat somewhere else, since my Mom and Dad would be mad if we were all killed, but we sat where we were told.

I was very afraid of being killed by a bomb. I could read very well now, and I read and saw pictures of a bomb called a "blockbuster". At night we had blackouts, when everyone turned off all the lights and sat in the dark, and some of the men would put on helmets and go out and write down the names of anybody who didn't have their lights out. It was very important. Then we went to bed and I listened till it was very late for the plane that was going to blow up our block. Every time I heard a plane, I held my breath and got cold and hot and started shaking, and when it passed over and we were still there, I cried because I knew it had been a plane looking for the bomber, and the bomber would probably be along next.

Our air force with the swell song needed planes for the "war effort", so my aunts went to work riveting parts of planes and guns. They wore jeans and blouses and tied scarves around their heads full of bobby pins, and they would take the bus to our house before work, bringing my Mom some food and hand-me-down clothes for us kids. They talked really tough, and gave us gum, and I loved to listen to them. All their boy friends were in the war, so they seemed to always have bobby pins in their hair. I thought maybe the war had better get over pretty soon.

My uncle went to an army camp and got very sick with some terrible disease. He was nearly dead for days, and my grandmother and my aunt flew on a plane with tickets paid for by the army to see him die. He fooled them and lived, and he got out of the army, but he couldn't work for a long time. I wondered how the army could afford airplane tickets when we couldn't afford new shoes.

By then meat was very hard to get, even from Sam the butcher, and it cost more than my Mom had. There was a "black market" where my Mom couldn't afford to shop, but some people went there. Then my aunt found a shop that had plenty of meat, and we had bigger pieces of meat in our dinner for a while, but somebody said it was just horsemeat, which I wasn't supposed to hear, and I didn't like it anymore. Then one day when my Mom put a nickel in our phone box and called Sears Roebuck, they had a special of one hundred day-old chicks for a dollar, and my Mom ordered some. My Dad laughed alot, but he built cages in the basement, and every day we fed them and gave them water with blue stuff in it so they wouldn't die. One chicken only had one leg, and he died, but the other ninety-nine got big and we ate them.

Each Sunday when my Dad was going to

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kill some chickens for dinner, my Mom made us all go in the other room and not watch, so we all went to the windows upstairs and watched him chop their heads off, and when the blood went flying, we all cheered. My Mom said just once she wished they would be cold before she had to fry them. When the chickens got bigger, we had roadt chicken, and then chicken with noodles. The neighbors talked funny about us having chickens, but I heard my Dad say that he bet on Sunday they wished they had some too.

We had a garden in our yard, and some of the neighbors withour room in their yards had little patches called "victory gardens' further south on Halsted street, where there were only fields. Sometimes we got to help take care of the garden, and I liked that better than cleaning the chickens. Every summer we canned lots of sticky peaches and tomatoes for the winter, and the juice dripped down my elbows and on my feet. My Mom always made jars of pears with green or red coloring to save for Christmas, and they looked awful. We even made root beet that I drank even if it did taste like yeast.

By now I was in the sixth grade and could go to the movies and watch the newsreels of the war and how many people were killed every day. At home, we read the paper and followed the war on a map. It seemed so confusing to be fighting in so many places. My teacher said it was all our fault, and that Russia was always right. She said lots of strange things, and when I told my Mom and Dad what she said, they got mad. The other teachers wouldn't talk to her and slammed doors in her face. She was a bad, nasty lady, and we were all happy to see her treated like that.

We girls were allowed to wear blue jeans because of the clothing shortage, which made us just as happy as when it was vacation time. Now we could reach the third floor of the building and climb in the window without the boys looking up our skirts and laughing. (They didn't seem to take the war as seriously as we did.) Later that year, when the war was getting tired, my Mom bought me some surplus wac uniforms made of seersucker striped with pale blue or green, with matching bloomers underneath. I felt just awful wearing them to school, but I had no choice. Then she sent for some surplus nylon parachutes that the war didn't need, and spread them out in the parlor, cutting out dozens of slips and blouses. Our brothers were lucky. They didn't have to wear parachute clothes to school.

I was eleven years old when Truman gave the order to drop the atomic bomb. Roosevelt had died earlier, and we had gone out on the porch and cheered to annoy the spindley old lady who lived next door and loved Roosevelt. She hated kids. Now there was Truman and I didn't have to worry about the blockbuster bomb anymore - it was worse. There were terrible stories in the paper and on the radio, and just everybody was talking about the bomb. They said it would end the war sooner and save lives, but it seemed to kill alot of people doing it, and I didn't even know if I liked those killed people, who probably had to wear parachute clothes and eat horsemeat just like us. I didn't feel very good about the war. The radio said it would be a great time, and all the men would come home. The papers were full of Truman and Stalin who was getting to be not very nice and of MacArthur smoking his corncob pipe on a ship. Some of my uncles were probably sleeping on ships down underneath him in hammocks.

Right at the same time the neighbors were arguing about letting Russia go ahead of us to win, the big headlines said the wars were over, and everybody was excited.

The old man who was a communist was divorced by his wife, who sold the goats and divided the block into lots, saving a few lots for her daughters and selling the rest to builders. We got a new stove with six burners and two big ovens and we had sugar every day. We did have to wear dresses to school again, and my Dad finally got a car, one of the first ones delivered, since my aunt was a car dealer. It was an oldsmobile station wagon with stars on the steering wheel.

They ran gas lines down our street, hooking them up to the gas light that was still working when I got married several years later, and there were parades for all the sailors and soldier that came home. My aunts took out their bobby pins and combed their hair. I thought about the men who didn't come home, since we now had to be even more quiet around their houses. There was a boy on the other side of my classroom who looked sort of cute, and I got a fuzzy permanent from my aunt, who didn't rivet planes anymore. My uncle came home and gave us a ride in a real army jeep. My dad got a job building barrack-shaped houses in Park Forest.

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GETTING UNSTUCK, BUT NOT UNGLUED

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,
by Robert Pirsig; William Morrow & Company, Inc.

What I am going to talk about today is that moment before the whistle that starts a race. In a swimming competition, the process of getting "unstuck"[1] is an observable physical action, so we will begin with what is most obvious; the action of a swimmer just at that moment prior to putting the mental and physical body into motion in a harmony that will allow the individual to make it to the end of the race as efficiently as possible.

This movement is equivalent to the popular and apt phrase, "hang loose." The swimmer leans over, eyes closed, and mentally and physically loosens all the muscles in his body and mind, ready to call on some "cutting edge" (283) that clears a path and enables the swimmer to select from some "subliminal" (281) reservoir the exact movements and harmony that will bring the best results.

This "hanging loose" can be related to Pirsig's reference to the Zen Buddhist "hollow-flexible attitude" (285) that includes the desire to solve a problem and the harmony of the "pre-intellectual awareness" (267) and the store of accumulated "facts" (281) that can be figuratively thrown into the air of the mind, creating various different patterns and possibilities, one or two of which may be grasped and put into action, or tested. Granted, the swimmer may select the wrong facts, and come up a loser, but that fact, added to the already existing facts, may eliminate or add other ideas that will provide just that right combination that will make the swimmer "unstuck" (280) enough to succeed.

This same "loose" attitude may be and is applied to any situation where an individual feels "stuck",(279) bogged down in an accumulation of facts that go no place. For example, when an individual, faced with some problem stops working and goes out to jog, to wash windows, or cut the grass. Personally, I clean my typewriter. Pirsig checks and repacks his motorcycle tools. The "T.M." advocate will retreat into meditation, tapping some universal source of strength. My father used to sharpen his carpenter's pencil with his pocket knife, humming some abstract and usually unrecognizable tune; then he suddenly came to life with a whole new approach to whatever problem he was "stuck" (279) on.

The important thing when "stuck" (279) is not to panic. Panic is what

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... causes a student to fail a test. Panic is what causes the swimmer to fall flat into the pool just before the whistle. Panic is what put Phaedrus into the hospital just as he stood within reach of the answer he needed.

Panic is what Pirsig, as the narrator, is trying to avoid. Retracing Phaedrus' journey, Pirsig incorporates this ability to get "unstuck", (280) the ability to conquer that moment of panic, to maintain the peace of mind necessary to choose the right way or method of arriving at a goal.

Pirsig's path does not lead directly to the solution he needs. Unlike Phaedrus, he incorporates what he calls "lateral drift," (118) moving towards his goal in a series of snake-like paths that constantly give him different perspectives of his goal. Also unlike Phaedrus, he allows plenty of time to "hang loose" or regroup his approach.

It is this concept of time that is most important: Citing the existence of "gumption", (302) Pirsig describes it as a state of mind that is acquired "when one is quiet long enough to see and hear and feel the real universe," (30 as in his example of a fishing trip. This is, of course, Pirsig's purpose of expanding into nature, rather than approaching his problem from the limiting cultural atmosphere of the city.

Pirsig describes various external and internal "gumption traps" (304) that may get in the way of a person who has "connected with quality," (303) noting two types of traps. The first type is external, and consists of errors such as leaving out a part when putting something back together, a "setback" (305) that requires the individual to take the machine (or idea) apart and put it back together again correctly. The second type of trap is the internal one, when the person cannot proceed because of some personal quirk. Discussing this internal trap, Pirsig notes especially the "value rigidity" (302) that prevents the solution of a problem.

This concept of rigidity brings us back logically to our swimmer. If he is caught by the fear that he can't succeed, or that he will forget the correct mechanics of his stroke, or that his suit might slip off, or more importantly, that he ought to be doing something else, he gets all bound up in his trap. This is why, just at that moment where he needs to "get it all together", we find our swimmer "hanging loose," becoming unrigid, avoiding the trap that will separate him from the quality or glue that holds the world together, in order to relate to his contest and his world with the peace of mind that comes of being in control of his situation.

1. Robert M. Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc. 1974. All further page references in quotes are from the same volume. Quotes without page references are examples of slang expression currently in use.

HEY, who ate my WordEATER Sandwich !?!
RAS